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SUBJECT: EMBASSY MINSK WEEKLY REPORT - October 28, 2005

¶1. The following are brief items of interest compiled by Embassy Minsk over the past week.

Human Rights

¶2. Authorities Cancel Youth Forum, Youth Leaders Detained

On October 22, authorities prevented a meeting of 85 leaders of youth organization from all the regions of Belarus. The participants planned to discuss youth issues and develop an "Alternative Youth Policy." The police detained three mini-buses carrying participants to the forum for administrative motorway violations. Police at the site of the forum canceled the meeting and told the participants who had already arrived to return home. The organizers blamed the GOB for canceling the forum and stated, "This government does not need young people who have their own point of view and system of values, have leadership abilities and are independent of the authorities."

¶3. Another Fine for Evangelical Churches

After an October 17 visit by officials from the city executive committee, Emergency Situations Ministry and the sanitary station to several Evangelical churches in Kobryn and Brest, authorities fined Evangelic Faith Christians pastor Mikalay Radkovich BYR 25,000 [USD 12] for fire violations, including the lack of a fire-extinguisher sufficiently large enough to service the building. The pastor added that the inspections occur regularly and that the authorities have drawn up reports on every member of the church of Evangelic Faith Baptists.

¶4. Malady Front Activists Sentenced for Carrying National Flag

On October 24, a Bobruisk judge in a closed trial sentenced Malady Front activists Dzianis Bujnitski and Siarhei Latsinski to two days in prison for hooliganism. The activists were detained two days before the trial for unfurling a Belarusian nationalist red and white flag at a rock concert.

¶5. Skrebets' Wife Denied Permission to Visit on Birthday

On October 25, authorities denied permission for jailed former MP Sergei Skrebets to see his wife on his birthday. Not having seen her husband since August, Aleksandra Skrebets visited the prison every day for two weeks before his birthday. When her request was

officially rejected, she left a parcel and a card for him.

¶6. Police Stop Opposition Gathering in Mozyr

On October 24, police broke up a meeting of opposition activists, including representatives of the Warsaw-based International Relations Center and former EHU lecturer Vyacheslav Pozdnyak. The police entered the house of United Civic Party leader Leonid Orlov, allegedly to look for illegal guns. The police filmed the search, photographed the participants and took several people to the police station. The Belarusians were released several hours later, and the foreigners were deported from Belarus.

¶7. Discrepancies in the Status of "Disappeared" Case

On October 24, after the Inter-Parliamentary Union's Committee meeting in Geneva, MP Anatoly Solovyov stated that the investigation into the disappearance of politician Viktor Gonchar has been re-opened "in connection with newly learned circumstances." The next day, however, the Minsk City Prosecutor's Office stated the investigation was never suspended. Gonchar's lawyer claimed, "Investigative activities are being kept under cover if conducted at all. They give no information to us and we know nothing of the investigation."

Elections

¶8. Belarusian Union of Officers (BSO) Wants Lukashenko to Run for President

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On October 23, the BSO called for Aleksandr Lukashenko to run in the 2006 presidential election. Citing stability, peace, safety, and economic growth, the BSO commended Lukashenko on his achievements as president. BSO asked retired members of the Belarusian Armed Forces to pool their support for the president.

¶9. Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Forms Youth Wing

On October 20, the BPF announced plans to form "Moladz BNF" (Youth of the BPF). The youth wing will consist of party members and youth from around the country who will carry out "human rights, printing, educational, cultural and sports projects." Moladz BNF will support opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's election campaign by collecting signatures and distributing information.

¶10. Third Presidential Nominee

On October 21, the New Belarus - Unity coalition nominated Liberal Democratic Party of Belarus leader and MP Sergey Gaidukevich as a presidential candidate. [Note: this is a new coalition, if it exists at all.] Gaidukevich, who ran in the 2001 presidential elections, has selected his campaign strategy team, but refuses to divulge any details about it or "show his cards" so early in the campaign.

Civil Society

¶11. Vitebsk Bombers Arrested

On October 21, authorities apprehended two brothers allegedly responsible for the September bombings in

Vitebsk, which injured over 40 people. They have been charged with attempted murder. The suspects allegedly confessed to the crime and Lukashenko praised the authorities for their quick closure of the investigation.

112. Belarus "Temporarily" Adopts Death Penalty

On October 26, the GOB amended the criminal code to include an amendment saying the death penalty in Belarus will be only "temporary." The amendment, which was proposed by Lukashenko, will remain in existence until cancelled and can be used as "an exceptional form of punishment for particularly grave crimes, such as premeditated murder in aggravating circumstances." Belarus has for years had a death penalty.

113. Dying to Leave Belarus

On October 23, Belarusian Medical Postgraduate Academy announced that Belarus has Europe's third highest suicide rate after Lithuania and Russia. The total number of suicides in Belarus (3,295) in 2004 exceeded the number of people killed in road accidents in that same year.

114. Propagandists To Promote Belarus' Image Abroad

On October 25, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Gerasimenko, at a two-day ideology seminar for 100 state propaganda officials and businessmen, told the audience to conduct a "preemptive and aggressive" campaign to improve Belarus' image abroad. He urged Belarusian agencies to unite their propaganda to "give foreigners a comprehensive view of Belarus."

Economics

115. GOB GDP growth Projections Not So Robust

On October 20, the Ministry of Economy announced Belarus may fall short of the projected seven-eight percent GDP growth rate targets for next year after international standards for calculating the Industrial Production Index (IPI) are implemented in Belarus. The IPI downplays industrial output, which is a significant component of the Belarusian economy. In order to reach the government mandated growth rates, Belarus will have to use the old calculation system.

116. GOB Tightens Control Over Poultry in Face of Bird Flu

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On October 25, the GOB signed an agreement to toughen sanitary control at national borders on the production, processing and sale of poultry in an effort to prevent avian flu from reaching Belarus. Within Belarus, the GOB carefully monitors the access to and the sanitary conditions of poultry farms. The GOB is also considering banning the import of fluff, feather, meat and bone flour from all countries. Currently, the GOB bans poultry import from Russia (except Kaliningrad), Kazakhstan, Turkey, Romania, Iran, and Greece, and is considering banning poultry from the U.K. and Croatia.

117. Presidential Decree Cuts Number of Alcohol Wholesalers

On October 27, Deputy Tax Minister Vasily Kamenko announced the number of wholesale alcohol traders in Belarus will fall from 486 to 27 in December 2006 after a presidential decree implementing new requirements for production, sale, and advertisement of alcohol comes into effect. Kamenko explained, "Belarus tightens the

requirements to protect consumers' rights and increase state budget revenues. In the 90's, the sector was de-monopolized and both consumers and the state suffered."

¶18. Russia and Belarus Strengthen Cooperation in Auto Industry

On October 20, Lukoil and the Minsk Automobile factory (MAZ) signed an agreement to create a symbiotic partnership for the manufacture and advertisement of lubricants. MAZ will promote Lukoil lubricants in conjunction with its truck sales while Lukoil will develop lubricants in accordance with MAZ technical requirements.

Bilateral Relations

¶19. Belarus and Venezuela Form Friendship

During Venezuelan Foreign Minister Ali Rodriguez Araquewill's October 21-22 visit to Minsk, the two countries laid the foundation for economic cooperation, especially in the sphere of agricultural machine building, technology and power engineering. The two countries have pledged to support each other at the international level since, according to Lukashenko, they have "identical views and identical goals in politics." This was the first visit of a Venezuelan foreign minister to Belarus since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1997.

Quotes of the Week

¶20. On October 25, Lukashenko inspected the site for the new National Library, which is expected to hold up to 14 million books and will include a 500-seat conference hall, bars, restaurants, a gym, a beauty parlor, and enough reading rooms to accommodate 2,000 visitors. Lukashenko warned the builders to work quickly but carefully:

"If I find out on completion that something is leaking or sagging, you will be held responsible. You must do a perfect job.... This library is our country's face so the make-up must be done thoroughly. I'm giving the last warning: God save you from faking it."

¶21. On October 26, Belarus' Foreign Minister threatened the EU when the EU Commission proposed to drop economic preferences for Belarus:

"The EU will lose the crumbs of respect Belarus still has for it if it imposes economic sanctions against our country."

¶22. On October 27, Parliament passed a bill mandating the relatives of state servicemen to declare their incomes. During the bill's debate in parliament, MP Vasili Khrol suggested including mothers-in-law on the list of persons subject to the mandatory income declaration requirement:

"How come grandparents and grandchildren must declare incomes and property, while the mother-in-law mustn't? Can you imagine what beautiful life mothers-in-law will be leading now? The families will carry them in their arms,

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after all property is registered in their name."

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